

Chapter XII

Patchwork E-Dialogues in the Professional Development of New Teachers

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Abstract

The encouragement of reflective writing within professional learning programmes is not new (Moon, 2003; Bolton, 2001; Winter, 1999). Electronic technologies, however, afford exciting opportunities to develop this practice to support participative and collaborative learning beyond barriers of time and place. This chapter explores the value of asynchronous dialogue in creating and sustaining communities of practice, with particular emphasis on the role of the e-mentor.

Introduction

In this chapter, we outline our commitment to and experiences of engaging in e-learning dialogue as teacher educators on an initial teacher education programme, PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education), for the post-compulsory sector. Our approach to technology draws on social constructivist learning theory (Wenger, 1998) and is

informed by critical, post-structuralist, and feminist epistemologies (Derrida, 1987; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Lather, 1991). Although we write here in relation to teacher education, we feel our commitment to person-centred practice development is equally applicable to other professional education and CPD settings within social work, nursing, and clinical education. In this chapter, we explain the importance of dialogue in professional learning, especially as a strategy in helping students make sense of de-contextualised propositional knowledge—the “language of abstraction” (Clandinin & Connolly, 1995). We emphasise the importance of “bringing the self” into discussions of professional practice and explain our choice of the “patchwork text” as a device for representing professional development (Winter, 2003). Technology lends itself particularly well to patchwork writing, and we describe the potential of VLEs (software products designed to support teaching and learning across the Internet) and Webfolios (electronic versions of portfolios) in supporting dialogue and reflection for developmental purposes (on course) and for presenting aspects of summative achievement (on completion). The challenges and issues involved in the changing roles of the tutor and student in e-dialogue are raised. In particular we discuss the role of the e-mentor in reducing learner dependency on “expert,” external knowledge and in helping students construct their own understanding by framing and reframing the “dilemmas” of professional practice. As portfolio-building is becoming a routinised practice in personal and professional development planning, we conclude by reflecting on the importance of pedagogy in framing institutional approaches to Webfolio design.

Initial teacher education has been subject to intense and significant change in the last 10 years. In the compulsory sector, the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) developed an increasingly specific and prescriptive framework of national standards for qualified teacher status (QTS) between 1994 and 1998. In the post-compulsory sector, the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) standards for learning and teaching were introduced in 2000, followed by a minimum core curriculum for literacy, language, and numeracy inclusion in 2003. Some writers have provided an optimistic reading of these changes as the advent of a “re-professionalised” teaching force (McCulloch, Helsby, & Knight, 2000), the welcome development of a “new professionalism” (Hargreaves, 1994), even a “transformative professionalism” (Sachs, 2003). Critics, however, suggest the standards (and the associated development of standardised pedagogies) represent “pedagogical deskilling” (Robertson, 1996). Reynolds (1999) argues, “Because of their specificity the standards, rather than providing insight into teaching, can be interpreted as an attempt to formularise classroom practice or to ‘standardise’ it in the narrowest sense” (p. 253).

One of the limitations of stripping down the craft skills involved in teaching and reformulating practice in detailed lists of performance outcomes is a failure to encourage creative or flexible approaches (Furlong et al., 2000; Mahony & Hextall, 2000). Curriculum specifications, teaching standards, and assessment practices can be seen as abstract knowledge, de-contextualised and de-personalised. Clandinin and Connolly (1995) have lamented the ceaseless cascade of “official knowledge” pouring into schools and colleges: “There are no people, events, or things—only words cut off from their origins” (p.10). It is important that teacher educators help new teachers make sense of this “language of abstraction.” One strategy is to blend the language of abstraction with the “language of story.” Beginning teachers can be helped to make sense of propositional,

non-temporal, generic knowledge through shared stories that are personal and contextual. Technology provides powerful tools that can support dialogue and collaboration, and in doing so, promote critically reflective practice across a community of peers (Brookfield, 1988; Schon, 1992).

The use of technology discussed here proceeds from a rejection of behaviourist notions of technologies as “drill and test” conditioning devices. The emerging literature on online learning foregrounds the social and communicative dimensions of learning (Laurillard, 2002; Salmon, 2000; Mason, 1998) and affords attention to the changing role of the tutor from the hierarchical relations of “subject expert” to the facilitator of person-centred teaching (Rogers, 1983). Our approach to professional learning is informed by Freire’s (1970) rejection of the “banking concept” of learning. Our approach to mentoring and assessment seeks to accommodate the storying of professional growth conceived as a creative narrative of the process of “becoming.” We feel that we are “becoming” e-mentors of new teachers in a “messy” and shifting space where “being in the swim” (Salmon, 2000) is at times a challenging, isolating, and highly rewarding activity.

Our commitment to “bringing teachers back in,” as a central focus of professional learning, reflects a shift over the last 10 years in writing about professional knowledge and practice (Goodson, 1995, 2003). Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf (2000) have described this shift as a “subjective or cultural turn in which personal and social meanings as bases of action gain greater prominence” (p. 1). Issues of subjectivity and identity formation are brought to the fore. We employ De Lauretis’ (1986) definition of subjectivity as “patterns by which experiential and emotional contexts, feelings, images, and memories are organised to form one’s self-image, one’s sense of self and others, and our possibilities of existence” (p. 5). As teacher educators this involves a reconfiguration of our role not simply in coaching learners in the technical skills of effective practice, but as “helping to bring the individual self into the school” (Chanfrault-Duchet, 2004, p. 279). This involves the displacement of functionalist constructions of “expertise” as a set of de-contextualised transferable skills, with a focus on the *active* construction of teacher knowledge and professional identity. Reflection is an important tool in this developmental journey.

Using Online Dialogue Journals to Develop Reflective Abilities

Reflective journal writing is an established technique in the professional education of teachers. Journaling can help beginning teachers make connections between specific, situated aspects of practice and general principles of professional knowledge. Thus, it has a potentially important role to play in countering the artificial separation of theory from practice. Dewey (1933) defined reflection as the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). Being reflective involves postponing judgement, re-exploring firmly held beliefs, interrogating assump-

tions, and a readiness to embrace challenges to one's identity. The use of dialogue journals—written reflective exchanges between two or more people—originated in teacher education for schools in the 1980s (Moon, 2003). Research since then has in general been restricted to their use in teacher education for the compulsory sector and in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) and teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). It is not a common practice in teacher education for the post compulsory sector, although it is adopted in many other professional vocational programmes such as nurse education (Bolton, 2001) and counselling.

The increasing availability of networked computers in the workplace and at home has extended opportunities for dialogue. There is an emerging body of research, reviewed by Becta (2004), that suggests that VLEs have value in supporting collaboration and dialogue within initial teacher education. Two main (and related) benefits are an increase in participation rates in discussions that are held online (Pilkington, Bennett, & Vaughan, 2000) and gains in confidence by participants (Selinger, 1997). Research by Tanner and Jones (2000) suggests that student teachers who might be reticent in face-to-face forums are more confident and participate at higher rates within online environments. In addition, research by Gibbs (1999) has indicated that students who engage in collaborative group work online show “higher levels of deep learning and significantly higher levels of strategic learning” (p. 221). Gibbs suggests that using VLEs in this way can promote “deeper conceptual understanding” (p. 221). A study of the use of FirstClass for communication purposes with PGCE students at the Open University by Kyriakidou (1999) found that online dialogue contributed to the professional development of students by facilitating reflective discussion. Similarly, Russell (2000) found that WebCT discussion with pre-service teachers significantly increased their level of reflection and preparedness to engage in routine self-study.

We have used online dialogue journals to support and sustain collaborative work among postgraduate students on supervised teaching practice in further education colleges in the West Midlands. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) was employed to overcome problems of spatial and temporal dislocation that are barriers to shared reflection and peer support during the practicum. Asynchronous dialogue helps to alleviate the sense of dislocation (from each other) and fragmentation (in terms of subject identity and curriculum studies) that can be experienced during lengthy periods of college-based placements. A virtual learning environment (VLE) afforded greater access to participants' writing and facilitated dialogue through reflective tasks supported by e-mentoring. The centrality of critical reflection and dialogue in this strategy reflects the Vygotskian notion that verbalisation is integral to the creative development of understanding and the development of more “inclusive” and “integrative” professional practice (Mezirow, 1991). The emphasis on collaborative ways of working is also an attempt to interrupt socialisation into occupational cultures characterised by fragmentation and a lack of trust. Many writers have discussed the need to break down “barriers to professionalism” (Kowalski, 1995) such as “privatism” in teaching (Hargreaves, 1994) and “balkanised cultures” (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991, p. 52). By engaging in collaborative work in the pre-service stage, a greater commitment to collegiality may be fostered.

Collaborative Activities in the Formation of the Patchwork Text

A “patchwork text” is defined by Richard Winter (1999) as “a general name for written texts where the unifying structure is not simply a linear narrative but a series of loosely linked pieces illustrating a theme or gradually building up a set of perspectives” (p. 67). In addition to using a conventional VLE to support file sharing and discussion across a *whole group* of learners, we have experimented with an evolving Webfolio or e-portfolio as a *personal* record and instrument for professional development. Our use of an e-portfolio is designed to embrace and encourage a range of communicative styles and voices. It offers a radical departure from the bulky text-only versions of earlier “teaching files” that encouraged only the archiving of statements of evidence relating to the achievement of prescribed standards of competence. Significantly, we aim to go beyond simply offering “digitised versions of traditional assignments” (Oliver & Shaw, 2003, p. 64). The approach to portfolio building suggested here is sensitive to Knowles’ (1998, p. 23) critique of the “chain-like” sequencing of formal learning events. Rather than offering a “painting by numbers” script for assessment, the e-portfolio, used in this way, supports learners in fashioning or fabricating their *own* narrative of their personal and professional development—“mystory.”

Moreover, the medium supports the inclusion of non-text patches. It offers additional tools for creativity and extends the range of possibilities for presenting students’ achievements to different audiences. Multimedia offer opportunities for visual representations such as still photography, video, and graphics, which have traditionally been neglected by “disciplines of words” (Mead, 1995). This is particularly useful in representing aspects of practice that are difficult to capture in literary form. Digital photography can be used to support reflection. Images can be collated and used by groups to generate culture collages that interrogate organisational contexts and encourage beginning teachers to form indigenous readings of workplace culture. Images are effective elicitation tools. In this way, Banks (2001) argues, “photographs effectively exercise agency, causing people to do and think things they had forgotten, or to see things they had always known in a new way” (p. 95). We have used metaphoric imagery as a way of explicating the tacit knowledge that informs practice. Metaphors are not simply descriptive or decorative uses of language. The selection of images tells us something about the processes of sense making and meaning making. Metaphor selections represent acts of cognition and suggest the parameters or interpretative frameworks within which and through which individuals act. By using a variety of techniques, beginning teachers can construct a spiral narrative that reflects their struggle to make sense of the new roles and identities that they must negotiate. These might include writing a personal learning autobiography, the collective construction of culture collage, photo montage, photo essays, critical incident analysis, and the shared storying of experience.

Learner-Centredness: Ownership and Sharing of Assets

An important dimension in the use of e-portfolios is the capacity to support and encourage self-direction. The communicative and collaborative functions of e-portfolio offer an informal, open learning space in which the learner makes the choices over form and content. The author selects which materials and discussions to share with members of a self-selected community of peers. “Asset sharing” is dynamic and relational rather than imposed and static. The sharing of assets is a communicative act in which the writers and asset sharers decide if their chosen community may view, comment, copy, or collaborate in their reflection. Within the community, dialogue is voluntary and grafted onto earlier assets.

For some members of the community this was a challenging and intrusive activity. Early asset sharing was coupled with ground rules set within face-to-face seminars and formative written feedback. The netiquette for asset sharing and dialogue was based upon this agreed communicative framework of respect and reciprocity. As e-mentors, we would argue that this blended approach to establishing reflective e-dialogues allows for early “online socialization” (Salmon, 2000), bridging the real and virtual dialogue spaces created within the PGCE. Establishing the role of the e-mentor and e-peer was an interesting early transitional dialogue. All dialogue included here is as it appears within the internal assets; the emphasis is upon exchange and creating a safe and comfortable space using the technology rather than adhering to the rules governing academic literacies.

JH: How do you feel about me intruding in your digital learning space?

Is my e-voice the same or different to my gel pen voice?

Claire E: I don't feel like you are intruding but providing another form of contact (or safety net). It is good to know there is someone else at the end of the virtual tunnel who knows which track I am heading along!!! As for your e-voice, in this era of technology advancement, I still like to see the gel pen voice and keep a “real” contact.

Claire W: Julie, your e-voice does seem different to me— your sentences are a lot longer and it makes the comments sound more like a train of thought.

Elaine: It is almost like Internet chatrooms where you do not see the person at the other end of your cyber chat.

Jane: I'm fine with you sharing my digital learning space— it's dead handy in that I can access my work from anywhere and read your comments and not just from home on

my work in box files! I think it's pretty much like having a conversation over e-mail or msn. I think that in general when something is written it can be understood differently than if someone had said something. People just have to be careful with what they write.

Elaine: I have no problem with you intruding into my digital space, although I always feel like Internet spies may be watching whenever I send anything via the Internet. Paranoid I know. Similarly to Jane's comment, this reminds me a lot of msn messenger, where I usually end up rambling.

Valentina: Hi. I don't mind you intruding my learning space, as Jane said it is like talking via e-mail or msn. I don't mind talking to people on pace, but I'm still not convinced about this e-portfolio. I find it so much easier on paper!!!!

It was important to recognise the students' existing transferable skills and literacies and to foreground their fears of the medium. The early e-portfolio exchanges mimicked traditional teacher-student turn taking models, and as e-mentors, we were keen for the knowledge construction to be discursive and unravelled by offering multiple points of departure.

From “Assessment Careers” to “Learning Careers”: The Role of the E-Mentor

One of the issues that we are confronted with in our encouragement of dialogue journals is the perceived constraint of summative assessment (Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003). Does the requirement of assessment de-legitimize the author's voice? Here, we need to consider asymmetrical power relations and appreciate the act of writing as social practice. There are clear tensions between the development of perspectives that afford attention and significance to learner “voice” and the value of experiential and reflective learning, and assessment and accountability regimes based on performance to prescribed standards. Next, the following account by Tom takes us back to the dilemma we face in our work with students schooled to play the game of assessment. Students are often keen to re-engage in a long established game of cat and mouse with the “assessor.” Success in their learning careers thus far may well have been premised on compliance with the teacher's game of “guess what's in my head,” the Bakhtinian (1986) notion of “ventriloquation.”

As far as I can imagine, the sharing of journals with a mentor and later one's STE group leads to a pressure to self-censor. One's own history becomes a field of omission and recreation, where feelings on the past are reconstructed to be palatable to others....In

the interests of being seen to “develop,” it is needed to maintain a “constructive” and perhaps “empathetic” view... The reflective journal— seen in a critical light— could be a way of reconstructing the past to make it seem as if things can be done by the teacher about circumstances we cannot really change, and eventually reconstructing the “teacher self” to take on personal responsibility for social, cultural, and political problems.

Tom’s reading of reflective practice alludes not to empowerment but to subjugation, an imposition of a particular “regime of truth.” The act of writing in a learning journal is seen as a “confessional” practice designed to form particular identities. Through the discourse of “evidence-based practice” and re-formed versions of “teacher professionalism,” individuals are constructed as “modern” professionals, with an attendant set of preferred characteristics. In his journal entry, Tom shows us how a critical pedagogy might be subsumed within a modernisation agenda that is characterised by individualisation rather than collegiality, where compliance rather than creativity is valued. As students struggle to take on the “authoritative voice” of the tutor/course leader/programme ethos, the e-mentor’s task is the persistent refusal to occupy entrenched positions and to act as critical friend and co-learner. Through such resistance the learner is denied the comfort zone of mimicry and the myth of ready-made solutions for each emergent dilemma.

Reflective practice entails an embracing of: uncertainty as to what you are doing and where you are going; confidence to search for something when we have no idea what it is; the letting go of the security blanket of needing answers. This kind of work leads to more searching questions, the opening of fascinating avenues to explore, but few secure answers (Bolton, 2001, p. 15).

The role of the e-mentor is not to pass judgement and close avenues for debate, but to open these out through the use of reflective prompts and dialogue across the group. The online environment offers a secure and disembodied environment within which to assert, explore, question, and reformulate responses to professional practice scenarios. An important role of the e-mentor lies in sustaining the discussion, preventing premature closure, returning to explore incidents again from a different perspective; inviting the re-reading of incidents through an alternative lens. All the extracts presented here are snatches of text taken from dialogue between tutor and students. The following response is an attempt to encourage Karen to re-visit an assessment of a critical incident in which a discussion activity in an evening class of adult learners had escalated “out of control.” Karen’s reading of the event concluded with a series of questions exploring how she might re-assert her control over the situation by silencing contributions. In her writing, Karen confronts the feelings she has about “losing” the power struggle in “her” domain of the classroom. Through dialogue, an attempt is made to postpone an initial defensive reaction and step back to look again at the dynamics and assumptions involved in this encounter.

You don't really want to stop the students contributing, do you? How else might you phrase this question? What strategies can you use to balance a need to control the parameters of discussion and encourage active participation and engagement? What options are available to you? Your journal also addresses the issue of working with adult learners and how you feel about working with "peers." What issues does this raise for you? How are you working through this? What does this say about your developing teacher identity?

The following response to Sofiah is taken from a longer series of prompts encouraging a re-exploration of an incident where classroom management concerns culminated in an angry rebuke of "disengaged" learners. The journal provides a space to explore interpretations from other perspectives. Consideration of the learners' stories of these encounters is useful in making sense of incidents and learning from them. The questions try to encourage practical deliberation but also personal reflection.

Have you profiled these learners? What background information might be helpful here? Did these students interrupt with "inappropriate" comments or low level/disruptive chatter among themselves? For what other reasons might students not participate in set tasks, other than "laziness"? Do these students always sit together and follow a settled pattern in classes? How can you avoid unprofitable anger taking over next time? Were you angry because you felt "undermined" or because the students disrupted others or because they risk "failure" in the exam? Looking back, how do you now feel about this incident? How have you made sense of it? What, if anything, would you now do differently?

From Tutor-Mediated Toward Community-Supported Learning

A dialogic approach to developing reflection and reflective writing is driven by a social and political responsibility to encourage all new teachers to enter their profession as *reinscribers* and *deconstructors* of text. The shift of addressivity afforded by the e-portfolio supports multiple narration. Participatory narratives are progressively determined by and within the group. This suggests the building of a sustainable community independent of the academic e-mentor; a community which offers the possibility of sustained critique, support, and networking beyond the realms of their PGCE. The following example contains anonymous dialogue as the subject is sensitive but is increasingly common in the PCE sector.

1. The groups were all very distressed and in some cases quite angry about the treatment they had received from the teacher and from the college itself, and wanted to take legal action. They have all paid for the course and some are relying on

passing for university entrance in September. I left at the end of the session feeling very pressured—the group were relying on me to get them through a year's worth of work in eight weeks... The main thing I have had to take out of this whole mess is the need to draw professional boundaries for myself. I want to help as much as I can with any class, particularly classes that have been badly treated, but there is only so much available that I can give, and if I push myself too hard, then there is a danger all of my classes will suffer because of it. I am a bit disappointed by some of the attitudes I have encountered and the treatment this class have and are receiving, but I cannot get too involved while I have so much else going on, so I will just have to offer my best support in the time available.

2. It's not fair that the curriculum manager should expect so much from you and put this kind of pressure on you into saying yes you would take over the class for extra lessons... I think it must have taken you a lot to say no to your manager, but you should take pride in your ability to have dealt with the situation so successfully and professionally. You can't and shouldn't feel pressured into doing something that you can't physically do, as much as you may want to. I think sometimes you just have to detach yourself from such situations and realise that you have done your best and it is now up to the college to sort the problem out.
1. Thanks for the support—I think you are right, if there is one thing that upsets students it is uncertainty and being messed about.
3. Firstly, congratulations on not bowing to the pressure of taking yet another group, they can be quite sneaky at the college with getting you to teach other classes.
4. X's journal this week really highlights the difficulty of deciding where you draw the line regarding your responsibilities to your students, and X's comments seem to reflect a similar thing. I've found a similar thing in my own placement: There's always more that you can do for your students, and you really need to keep everything in perspective and make sure you prioritise in a way that suits your students AND you. Well done on standing up for yourself—you can't take responsibility for fitting a whole year's teaching into a few weeks!
5. I think it was very brave of you to stand firm on this situation and you were right to do so. I think I would have backed down and took on the high workload and sunk in the process. Considering you were worried about your assertiveness, I think this shows how you have developed.

These exchanges between a “becoming” group of new teachers demonstrate a politicised knowingness of the “games” of further education. They did not look to the e-mentor as “expert” to guide and inform, but instead to each other for community support, reciprocity, and challenge. Student 1 does not disclose with ease within the classroom situation—hence, the references to growing assertiveness, yet the horizontal nomadic spaces offered within the e-portfolio allowed this student to narrate her reflective story in a highly self-aware manner. Student 4 speaks to and for the group as a collective drawing together or “weaving” the strands of the patchwork within pressing professional discourses (Salmon, 2000). This evidences the possibilities for a discursive space for resistance sustained by and through new technologies.

What Issues are Involved in Introducing E-Dialogue in Teacher Education?

Our engagement with technology in promoting dialogue has raised the following issues:

1. **Struggle to legitimate informal horizontal dialogue in professional education programmes:** The movement to “outcomes-based education” creates a pull toward valorising visible and measurable demonstrations of achieved competence. Informal learning is slippery and constant and does not deliver itself up to scrutiny and judgement easily. The development of self-knowledge and situated understanding, using the tools of dialogue and narrative, are not easily reducible to the convenience of “chunk and check” assessment.
2. **Input into the design of learning environments that will accommodate dialogical practice:** The dual cultures of technology and pedagogy need to be utilised fully in the design of learning environments capable of advancing the development of an online constructivist pedagogy. Communication, collaboration, and dialogue are essential features of e-portfolio design. Webfolios should not be conceived as repositories from which student assets might be harvested for summative assessment. A content-driven model undervalues the significant processes involved in the development of professional judgement.
3. **Resistance from strategic learners anxious to “play the game” of assessment:** The close and sustained conversations encouraged through sharing stories work against the considerable pressures to mimic the “authoritative voice” of the tutor as “expert.” The absence of a compulsion to share diminishes the likelihood of inauthentic contributions to discussions. The capacity of learners to direct asset sharing is an important consideration in challenging students’ long-held notions about “writing for assessment.”
4. **Training needs of learners and mentors—technical and pedagogical:** Innovation within teaching and learning requires embedding through a process of backward mapping, rather than “rolling out” (or “over” colleagues and students). Technological literacy and a commitment/readiness to change require support and time, rather than hasty imposition. There are clear resourcing implications here. The history of curriculum reform is littered with short-term, top-down experiments that falter and fail with the withdrawal of the “pioneer” or “champion.” Sustained exposure to the technology is necessary from induction. The fostering of a non-threatening and supportive community takes time. The regular and autonomous sharing of writing is likely to take a minimum of three months to establish.
5. **Equitable access to resources away from the university campus:** Technological tools, like any other learning resource, need to be assessed to ensure equitable access for all learners. Initial assessment of learners’ needs should consider variations in the availability and speed of online access, as well as levels of competence and confidence in using tools without (and/or beyond initial) face-to-face support. It is important that technological “advances” do not further exacer-

bate the problems faced by learners who are already disadvantaged or excluded by traditional academic practices.

6. **Issues in tutors' online participation in (and assessment of) digital portfolios:** There is no denying the considerable demands placed on tutors who choose to engage in online mentoring. The requirement to fade from the discussion and enable learners to eventually support a self-sustaining online community is important. The tutor might aim to progressively recede to the less visible and less interventionist role of moderator and lurker. Not all tutors will feel comfortable with this re-positioning and may struggle to cede "authority," ownership, and control to the learner. Dialogue journals strengthen the relationship between tutor and learners. However, what may initially begin as mundane and superficial readings as writers "suss out" the environment, can quickly become absorbing, fascinating, and exhausting to maintain.
7. **Interoperability of e-portfolio across platforms (on graduation):** Accreditation is one step in a teaching career, it is not an end in itself. Professional learning does not cease with the award of a formal teaching qualification. In designing platforms to support e-portfolio building, it is important to look to the future. Will the learner be able to continue to compile and/or showcase their journey, the ongoing story of their professional development? Will potential employers be able to access updated versions? How can the conversations be sustained in new contexts of practice as fresh challenges emerge?

Future Trends

VLEs have been available from the mid-1990s and can be used at a number of levels for a range of different purposes (O'Leary, 2002). The challenge facing educationists in the future is to move from the simple "content and support model" of VLE use (Mason, 1998) toward more "integrated" models that support interaction and collaboration. The former require only the archiving of course materials and the transmission of information to passive recipients. The latter requires much higher levels of learner participation as decision-maker and contributor. Learning environments informed by constructivist approaches need to offer open-ended, exploratory, authentic learning tasks that encourage meta-cognition and enhance student motivation. Unlike objectivist pedagogy that sees the learner as passive receptor of de-contextualised knowledge, constructivist approaches accentuate the knowers "construction" of reality as a purposive act. This extended version of VLE use is not simply about giving information but also coming to understand through collaboration and dialogue (Laurillard, 2001; Bohm, 1996). The use of dialogue journals is one strategy in this move from transmissionist to collaborative uses of information and learning technologies (ILT).

The use of Webfolios to record and support personal development is developing rapidly in post-compulsory education and within performance management structures in employment. The Dearing Report (DfEE, 1997) first recommended the use of progress files for recording transcripts of student achievement and as "a means by which students can

monitor, build, and reflect upon their personal development.” Since 2005, it is mandatory for all undergraduate students to be given an opportunity to engage in personal development planning (PDP) (Quality Assurance Agency, 2001). A systematic review of evidence by Gough et al. (2003) indicates that PDP has a positive effect on learning, attainment, and approaches to learning. PDP software packages are being piloted at a growing number of higher education institutions and include: LUSID (Liverpool University Student Interactive Database); RAPID (Recording Academic, Professional, and Individual Development) at Loughborough University; the “Matrix” of skills, abilities, and qualities at the University of East Anglia; e-PARS (Personal Academic Record System) at Nottingham University; the PESCA portfolio (Personal, Employment, Social, Career, and Academic) at Exeter University; “Keynote” at Nottingham Trent University; and “PebblePAD” at the University of Wolverhampton. The development of electronic portfolios is likely to be a growing market as higher education institutions meet the challenge of introducing PDP across all undergraduate programmes.

Portfolio building is becoming a formal requirement of representation and progression in teaching from the career entry stage through to headship. Portfolios were advocated by the Teacher Training Agency in 2003 with the introduction of the Career Entry and Development Profile. The Department for Education and Science (2001) directed all teachers in the compulsory sector to develop a professional portfolio as an integral part of the emerging performance management culture. Since the introduction of the upper pay scale in September 2000, 259,000 teachers have collated portfolio evidence to pass the threshold standards. The professionalisation of the workforce for the post-compulsory sector is anxiously pursuing this model. Professional development portfolios are now increasingly used to prepare for job interviews, threshold, or Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) applications, and performance review/appraisal meetings. There will be a growing demand for software packages that support the profiling of personal development and achievement from initial accreditation into employment within teaching and related occupational fields such as health and social care.

The availability of a greater range of technologies generally available among the student population also opens up new and exciting opportunities. In the past, educators have been constrained by the limits of commercial courseware authoring systems. A challenge for the future will be to harness the new technologies that are increasingly available in the public domain to support learning. Future developments are likely to include greater incorporation of mobile learning (i.e., hand-held devices, personal digital assistants, smart phones, podcasting) within blended learning. This is evidenced in students inclusion of artefacts in their Webfolios captured using camera phones or produced with alternative software (e.g., Flash produced photo essays). Such developments further extend the possibilities of using image and audio files as reflective prompts and portfolio assets.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered the use of online dialogue within VLE and Webfolio environments to support the development of reflective abilities in beginning teachers.

Our approach is informed by a concern to place the teacher at the centre of professional development. We have used technology to support the “storying” of professional development and the sharing of stories, critical incidents, and personal narratives across a community of peers.

In our experience, online dialogue journals supported within VLE workgroup folders have many strengths. They can accommodate collaborative working—shared resources and dialogue—at a distance. Dispersed groups in workplace settings are able to stay in touch quickly and easily. A single posting can reach every group member. Access permissions can be used to create a secure and safe space for discussion. A transparent record of activity is developed through discussion threads that can be moderated. In addition, the asynchronous nature of communication allows time for learners to formulate considered responses. In considering this use of technology, however, it is also important to acknowledge the potential problems. Asynchronous communication may prove a barrier to the formation of group identity with learners who do not meet face-to-face. Online “talk” lacks the visual cues that support face-to-face communication, and this may prove an obstacle for some learners. The location of workgroup folders within a formal learning environment, hosted by the “assessing” institution, may distort communication. There are cost implications for learners in accessing online activities away from the university campus, and this may raise equity issues. It is also important to recognise that learners need to develop the skills and motivation to participate effectively in an online learning environment. Not all learners will elect to participate to the same extent. There is also the danger that more assertive online “voices” may stifle discussion and influence the contributions of others.

Many of these potential problems, however, can be managed by ensuring that initial activities are exploratory but tightly framed. It is important to offer strong support in the early stages of online socialisation (Salmon, 2000). Initial tasks need to be carefully scaffolded and adequate consideration given to the provision of induction activities to promote early engagement. Conducting a skills audit (including previous experience of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in formal and informal learning contexts) during the induction stage is useful in identifying the range of support needs and planning to meet these needs. Of critical importance is the role of the e-mentor in encouraging participation and promoting different forms of reflection—practical/technical, personal, and critical—through the careful use of open questions. The e-mentor’s task is to postpone judgement and premature closure and to encourage writers to re-explore practice scenarios through alternative lenses. Rather than providing the “authoritative voice” and acting as a relay device for “official” or “codified knowledge” (Bernstein, 1996), the e-mentor promotes communicative acts that help beginning teachers to reach their own understanding. Supporting dialogue and asset sharing through the communicative functions of e-portfolio has the additional advantage of affording enhanced levels of learner control and self-direction. Writers and asset sharers decide if their chosen community may view, comment, copy, or collaborate in their reflection. This shift in addressivity is fundamental to claims of student-centredness.

As portfolio building becomes a routinised practice in personal and professional development, it is important that pedagogical concerns and an appreciation of how adults learn inform institutional approaches to Webfolio design and usage. The discussion of patchwork e-dialogues presented here is premised on a model of participative, collabo-

rative practice (Huberman, 1993). From this perspective, teachers are not reduced to “subjects” but remain central agents in their own development. We support Smyth and Shacklock’s (1998) call for teachers to develop “indigenous, comprehensive theories of their teaching” (p. 27). The framing and reframing of problems through dialogue is integral to this process. From this perspective, digital technologies are seen as enabling technologies with the capacity to help learners develop self-knowledge and deeper conceptual understanding and to erode their sense of isolation in fragmented occupational cultures. By foregrounding the developmental purposes of professional portfolios, we can resist their co-option as digital archives, tools of “representational fabrication” (Ball, 2004; Clegg, 2004). The extent to which staff are able to exploit the communicative functions of new media in developing discursive activities will determine whether Webfolios become “cover stories” of the audit culture or powerful developmental tools in the future.

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